

Sports COVER STORY

NB Speed Skating Club boasts long history of Olympic athletes

Olympian Brian Hansen visits NB before the Games

NEIL MILBERT, Staff Writer

A few hours before Brian Hansen boarded a flight to training camp in Italy on Jan. 21 — where he is preparing to compete in four events in the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia — he paid a visit to the Northbrook Speed Skating Club.

"Northbrook is a community that's supportive of speedskaters. You guys have something unique and special in your neighborhood," he said to a crowd of young admirers.

The club is based at the Northbrook Sports Center, 1730 Pfingsten Road, as an affiliate of the Northbrook Park District. That's where 23-year-old Hansen got his start at just 10 years old.

Hansen won a silver medal at the 2010 Olympic Games in Team Pursuit. In the locker room at the Northbrook Sports Center, he spoke to kids about his international experience.

Then Hansen spotted 83-year-old Chuck Burke (an Olympic speedskater in 1952 and 1956), and he greeted his former coach with warmth and affection.

"Know that Northbrook is a unique place. You have a lot going for you here," he told the youngsters. "Coming through this club is a big deal. ... A lot of great skaters have come from here. You guys could be next."

Burke and his wife, Donna, were among the first coaches of the Northbrook Speed Skating Club, which dates back to 1952 and has produced at least one member of Team USA in all but one of the Winter Olympic

Games since then. That is when Northbrook earned the nickname as "The Speedskating Capital of the World."

"It was a dedicated group of families who started this [club]," Burke said. "We started outdoors on the pond behind the Historical Society building. Then we moved to an indoor rink, and then to this rink."

"My wife was a National and North American champion, and now she's a national finish judge. At the start, I was in and out of coaching because I was in the Army in Germany and in the Olympic Games."

Burke was unsuccessful in his quest for an Olympic medal when he skated in Oslo, Norway, in 1952 and Cortina, Italy, in 1956. But he has the distinction of being among those who competed on a frozen lake in Cortina, which was the last time the event was held on natural ice.

As a coach, he has been instrumental in developing 16 U.S. World and Olympic team members.

"We've had so many great skaters but, all in all, I think Dianne Holum was the best," Burke said. "She stayed in the sport as a coach and was Eric and Beth Heiden's coach."

Holum was a gold and silver medalist in the 1972 Olympics after earning silver and bronze medals in the 1968 games. Her suburban Madison, Wis.-based protégé, Eric Heiden, took home five gold medals in 1980. In addition, his sister, Beth Heiden, was a bronze medal winner that same year.

Holum was one of two Olympic-medal winners from the Northbrook Speed Skating Club who skated in Sapporo, Japan, in 1972. Her



Brian Hansen, who trained with the Northbrook Speed Skaters Club, signs an autograph at the Northbrook Sports Center before leaving the country for the 2014 Winter Olympic Games. ALEX MAYSTER/22ND CENTURY MEDIA



Eric Laporte, 12, a current member of the Northbrook Speed Skaters Club, skates at the Northbrook Sports Center. PHOTO SUBMITTED

teammate, Anne Henning, earned a gold medal and a bronze medal.

Their showing was so impressive that when Ted Damata, who covered the Games for the *Chicago Tribune*, detailed their accomplishments, he datelined his story as "Northbrook, Japan."

"The *Tribune* used to sponsor the Silver Skates and gave speedskating a lot of coverage," Burke recalled. "When my teammate, Ken Henry, won a gold medal in the 1952

Olympics, the *Tribune* story referred to him as a two-time Silver Skates winner. There used to be a lot of local skating meets."

Hansen played many sports when he was growing up, but he said he enjoyed speedskating the most and eventually decided to focus on it.

"I liked to go fast and compete against my friends from Northbrook," said Hansen, who will be joined on the Olympic team by another Northbrook Speed

NBSSC Olympic athletes

NEIL MILBERT, Staff Writer

Northbrook Speed Skating Club alumni Brian Hansen and Mitch Whitmore will be competing in the Winter Olympic Games, representing the U.S. in Sochi, Russia.

There are 19 members of the Northbrook club who have represented the U.S. at the Olympics. Several members have appeared in the Winter Games more than once, and six of them won medals, earning a collective total of 12 medals — two gold, eight silver and two bronze.

Northbrook's Olympians

Chuck Burke — 1952, 1956

Beverly Buhr — 1960

Eddie Rudolph — 1960, 1964, 1968

Neil Blatchford — 1968, 1972

Sally Blatchford — 1968

Gregory Lyman — 1972

*Ann Henning — 1972

*Dianne Holum — 968, 1972

*Leah Poulos — 1972, 1976, 1980

Mark Huck — 1984

Jan Guldman — 1984, 1985

Lydia Stephans — 1984

David Cruikshank — 1988, 1992, 1994, 1998

*Andy Gabe — 1992, 1994, 1998

Nathaniel Mills — 1992, 1994, 1998

Margaret Crowley — 2006

*Lana Gehring — 2010

*Brian Hansen — 2010, 2014

Mitch Whitmore — 2010, 2014

*An asterisk indicates a medal-winner.

Skating Club alumnus, 25-year-old Mitch Whitmore. "Being a speedskater made me unique. ... It's a fun sport, and it's been quite the journey."

"Growing up, Northbrook's meet was one of the biggest meets," Hansen said. "I still remember getting the Chuck Burke Award. It was a very prestigious award."

The 100-by-200-foot Northbrook Sports Center is one of five rinks in the Chicago metropolitan area that can accommodate short-track skaters.

Milwaukee's Pettit National Ice Center is 200-by-85, making it international size and one of

only two long track venues in the U.S.

"Our rink is fine for the kids until they get to a certain point," Burke said. "Then the kids who are serious about the sport will go to the Pettit rink ... to work on the long track. Short track and long track are different, but they help one another."

For example, short track is good for teach turns, and the long track offers a good straightaway.

"Everything has changed [about the sport] except for the most important thing — the first one across the line wins," Burke said.

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CARRYING ON A LEGACY

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Olympian Brian Hansen, who trained at the Northbrook Speed Skating Club, gives an interview with ABC 7 News at the Northbrook Sports Center on Jan. 21. ALEX MAYSTER/22ND CENTURY MEDIA

INSET: Glenview native Brian Hansen is one of the fastest speed skaters in the world. PHOTO SUBMITTED